

VACCINES – Your Best Shot At Staying Healthy



By Susan Peters, Volunteer Attorney
Legal Hotline for Michigan Seniors

About 50,000 adults die needlessly each year from vaccine-preventable diseases such as pneumococcal disease (pneumonia), hepatitis B, meningitis and seasonal influenza. More than 1 million adults suffer from shingles each year even though a vaccine exists that eases the disease and even prevents it. Almost everyone who gets shingles has pain and some have described it as the worst they have ever experienced. Yet Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) studies indicate that less than 2% of the affected population has been vaccinated.

Older adults are particularly at risk when it comes to these diseases. The aging process makes one increasingly fragile for a variety of reasons and senior immune systems may be compromised as a result of other health concerns. As we age it is more difficult avoiding and coping with disease. A disease may have a greater impact on people as they age—what might mean a box of tissue to a younger person could put a senior in the hospital . . . or worse. Consequently, older adults should make disease prevention a priority. An easy way of doing this is to take advantage of the routine vaccines which are available and encouraged for seniors.

While vaccinations are not mandated for older adults, they are strongly encouraged. The CDC has recommended that anyone over 50 receive a flu shot and anyone over 60 should get vaccinated against shingles. The CDC adds the pneumonia vaccine to its list of recommendations for people 65 and older. Flu vaccines are administered annually – generally in the fall before the season begins. The pneumonia vaccine is generally only needed once if you are over 65 and have never been vaccinated. The shingles vaccine is given once and is effective for at least 6 years and may last longer. Medicare covers both influenza and pneumonia vaccines. Medicare Part D covers the shingles vaccine. Medicaid and private plans may provide coverage, as well, and those insured in this way should contact their insurers directly to determine coverage.

The Legal Hotline for Michigan Seniors (800-347-5297) is available, free of charge, to assist callers aged 60 and older with questions of a legal nature. It also serves as a clearinghouse for directing clients to more specialized assistance to solve their problems. For more information concerning vaccines visit the CDC website at www.cdc.gov or call 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636). Before obtaining a particular vaccine one should always discuss individual health needs with a healthcare provider.

